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Sense and Nonsense on Jane Austen

The Summer 1991 issue of *Critical Inquiry* included an essay by Eve Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl", a post-structural answer to Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1990), a polemic against the degenerate, corrupting influence of Cultural Marxism—its woke identity politics. Their methods of interpreting texts are opposed. Kimball is focused on close reading, Sedgwick on reader response.

The gulf between them suggests larger cultural battles, the most prominent being the Frankfurt School's "immanent critique" of reason after Kant. In textual criticism, this became obvious towards the end of the twentieth century, as partisans in the culture wars made claims about what texts were saying and doing with no evidence apart from a will to propagate their ideology. In "Freedom and Interpretation" (1992), Frank Kermode describes this as balancing critical rigour against ideological pressure from post-structuralism's insatiable, irrational, and radical demands for liberation:

> It is maintained by many, and in various formulations, that such notions as those of the text as a work, a work having an identifiable structure and closure, and associated with this or that kind or genre, produced by an author with some control over it, taking its place in that large class of works usually known as literature, and having a value which may conceivably be greater than that of the next bit of writing one casually picks up, are archaic or venal, the consequence of complicity with, or brainwashed capitulation to, oppressive forces.

Kermode notes the tendency of a new guard to wrest authority from an old guard—disguised as emancipation—protecting its sphere of influence through cadres "who have the advantage of confidence in new and fascinating programs, almost one could say, of the benefits of conversion to a new faith". Yet:

> What is hardly in doubt is that like all hermeneutic fashions, these will, if they achieve authority, be opposed and subverted in their turn, the old contest between authority and freedom resumed on new ground. In this respect, hermeneutic freedom is of a piece with all freedom. It is always to be won by conflict; its scope will change, just as the nature of individual freedom changes, as the very notion of what it is to be free changes with larger cultural change; it can be more or less violent and it can be more or less violently opposed and oppressed.

As this pendulum swings between revolution and reaction, trivial "hermeneutical contests" become political struggles for institutional control and endless critical freedom:

> License or liberty? That will always be the question to be answered by whoever is on top; if the rebels of today become the government of tomorrow, it will no doubt be answered forcefully. The difficulty of straightforward discussion is compounded by the success of a postmodernist opinion concerning the relativism of truth: the truth of a discourse is what that discourse self-referentially establishes; it is a product of suasion, an epiphenomenon of rhetorical action. What used to be called lying is now the only way to argue. Anything is true if I can say it persuasively.

In other words, evidence is no longer required to demonstrate a thesis. All the critic needs to do is claim to be propagating an emancipatory discourse, like a trickster performing a trick.

Sedgwick applies queer theory to Austen's novels to uncover evidence of lesbianism and coercive heteronormativity. She is animated by the Muse of Masturbation (onanism) objection to which she

notes was originally applied equally to both sexes, but "anti-onanist discourse seems to have bifurcated in the nineteenth century". Cultural anxiety over male masturbation motivated mechanisms of "discipline and surveillance" which contribute much to "the late nineteenth-century emergence of a widespread, class-inflected male homosexual identity and hence to the modern crisis of male homo/hetero definition".

Cultural anxiety over female masturbation contributed to the emergence of gynaecology "through an accumulated expertise in and demand for genital surgery; of such identities as that of the hysteric; and such confession-inducing disciplinary discourses as psychoanalysis". She believes if masturbation is normalised, the masturbator may be a key to remapping sexual identity, the lost identity of the masturbator becomes a prototype of modern sexual identity:

> I am taking *Sense and Sensibility* as my example here because of its odd position, at once germinal and abjected, in the Austen canon and hence in "the history of the novel"; and because its erotic axis is most obviously the unwavering but difficult love of a woman, Elinor Dashwood, for a woman, Marianne Dashwood. I don't think we can bring this desire into clear focus until we see how Marianne's erotic identity, in turn, is not in the first place exactly either a same-sex-loving one or a cross-sex-loving one (though she loves both women and men), but rather the one that today no longer exists as an identity: that of the masturbating girl.

Sedgwick thinks Elinor has a "one-directional visual fixation on her sister's specularized, desired, envied and punished autoeroticism" which offers a "useful model for the chains of reader-relations constructed by the punishing, girl-centred moral pedagogy and erotics of Austen's novels more generally", with "its unresting exaction of the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson".

Sedgwick believes Tony Tanner is the "ultimate normal and normalising reader of Austen". His crime is treating Austen's heroines as characters who must conform to expectations (italics in original):

> "Emma … *has to be tutored* … into correct vision and responsible speech. Anne Elliot *has to move*, painfully, from an excessive prudence." "Some Jane Austen heroines *have to learn* their true 'duties'. They all *have to find* their proper homes." Catherine "quite literally is in danger of perverting reality, and one of the things she *has to learn* is to break out of quotations"; she *has to be disabused* of her naïve and foolish 'Gothic' expectations." Elizabeth and Darcy "*have to learn to see* that their novel is more properly called" … A lot of Austen criticism sounds hilariously like the leering school-prospectuses or governess-manifestoes brandished like so many birch rods in Victorian sadomasochistic pornography.

Notice what is happening here. Sedgwick does not offer a close reading of Austen's novels in general, or *Sense and Sensibility* in particular, or Tanner's distinguished reading of Austen's novels. She simply makes sweeping generalisations about the past, so the text means what she wants it to mean, guessing what hypothetically might be there but is not there. Sedgwick's world is different from Austen's. She has what Kermode calls a "confidence in new and fascinating programs, almost one could say, of the benefits of conversion to a new faith". She lives in a world that, having experienced the sexual revolution, believes anyone can do anything they want without negative consequences for self, family, or society. Austen did not live in that world.

Textual criticism is dynamic. If the reader is an agent who adds to the text's existence, what are the limits? Can they add anything they want? Two centuries separate us from Austen's world, there have been revolutions in social and sexual mores, but Sedgwick's relevance depends on whether Marianne is masturbating. If she is not, then the Muse of Masturbation is specious, a kind of fake news.

So, who determines what is specious in reader response? Kermode offers guidance:

> My own view is that as with the power of the state, we owe the author's meaning just the degree of deference due by reason of our acceptance of the rational freedom the text confers. Derrida has called the literal sense a guard rail; it prevents us from saying some things and also enables us to say what is not nonsense. And it is important not to talk nonsense about texts, either by distorting them to fit anterior assumptions or by supposing that having, by a process of sudden enlightenment, got rid of those assumptions, one has won the right to say anything that comes into one's head.

As a "lost identity" that Sedgwick seeks to recover—in the spirit of Foucault's "subjugated knowledges"—the Masturbation Muse is nonsense.

Sedgwick takes Austen out of context to promote trendy post-structuralist ideology. This was acceptable—even compulsory—in a culture where the correspondence theory of truth was rejected for the moral relativity of perspectivism. Sedgwick relies on presentism, the error of anachronistically projecting contemporary values and concepts onto the past.

How should Austen's novel be taught to students? What is really happening in the text? Above all, the student should be taught about Austen's loyalty to the principles of dramaturgy in Aristotle's *Poetics* (c.335 BC). The bedroom scene is at the novel's centre. It functions as a climax (turning point) from the novel's rising action (its complication) to the falling action (its unravelling). The novel does indeed revolve around the lesson Marianne must learn if she is to perceive things correctly. This is a core idea in *bildungsroman*, the genre where a child must mature before she can negotiate the adult world successfully. This used to be called growing up.

In an Austen novel, the resolution (*denouement*) depends on protagonists achieving an appropriate balance of reason and feeling on which a proper understanding of the structure of reality and nature of truth depend. This is what drives the dramatic action. After two centuries of immanent critique, twenty-first-century readers no longer intuit reality or truth this way. Thus, the moral of Austen's stories is unseen by those trained to unsee morality.

Sedgwick dismisses the idea that heroines must mature and become adults, ignoring the need to protect the heroine from moral danger. Present-day readers have birth control and antibiotics. If Sedgwick were to get pregnant or a disease from a latter-day Willoughby—or Wickham, Henry Crawford, William Elliot, or Colonel Brandon's older brother—she has access to non-judgmental solutions unavailable to Austen.

Having drawn attention to the classical novel's Aristotelian structure, students can be introduced to Austen's liminal relationship with romanticism. The first and last chapters of each Austen novel frame the allegory/parable of intervening chapters. In *Sense and Sensibility,* the primary moral is what happens when biblical injunctions pertaining to widows and orphans are disobeyed. Elinor and Marianne are not responsible for their social disadvantage, but they are responsible for their individual responses to it. Despite the emotional cost of guarding her feelings and checking her enthusiasm, Elinor does this better than Marianne.

Austen bursts the bubble of Marianne's romantic ideals because they are inherently dangerous. Willoughby sweeps her off her feet, literally. He appears like a knight in shining armour but turns out to be Byronic: mad, bad, and dangerous to know. Colonel Brandon is the real knight, although his armour is a flannel waistcoat. Marianne thinks flannel is what old people wear, although he is still relatively young, and flannel is a sensuous fabric.

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The image of Colonel Brandon as a knight in sensuous flannel is hard to sell. Many female readers have desires like Marianne's, as the lyrics of Bonnie Tyler's song attest: I'm holding out for a hero, god-like, streetwise Hercules, strong, fast, fresh from the fight, larger than life, a wild fantasy, reaching back to me, to sweep me off my feet.

Austen manoeuvres Marianne through this fantasy. Having successfully come of age, after a period of trial, Marianne succumbs to an "extraordinary fate". At the age of nineteen, after discovering the falsehood of her opinions, and counteracting her favourite maxims, she found herself "a wife, mistress of a family, and patroness of a village".

In *Jane Austen and Food* (1995), Maggie Lane provides an illuminating description of Marianne's fate, focused on the symbolism of a mulberry tree in Brandon's garden:

> A mulberry tree takes a very long time to come to fruition. So does Colonel Brandon, who is thirty-eight when he marries Marianne, and, if they are to have a family, as they surely are, will be in his forties when his children are born. Though we are to presume a monkish celibacy about his early life, he is not as dried up as Marianne first presumes him to be. Is there even a promise of sexual pleasure for her in that "Lord! how Charlotte and I did stuff?" Readers who have felt uneasy about the docility with which Marianne allows herself to be married off to Colonel Brandon in the last few pages of *Sense and Sensibility*, should think back and take comfort from the mulberry tree.

Colonel Brandon has survived romanticism's dark shadows himself and is still romantic. His love of Eliza Williams Sr and guardianship of Eliza Williams Jr taught him the value of self-control. He understands Marianne's emotions; he shares them himself. This is what makes him a perfect husband for her, although she had to mature before she could know that.

In the female-centred novel, the heroine usually falls for, or is pursued by, the wrong man, who is sexy or charming or compelling in some way. As this pursuit follows its formulaic trajectory, the right man, who is usually ordinary and less attractive, is often waiting patiently in the background, to be there for her when things fall apart. The moral is simple: Mr Right is always better than Mr Wrong. The latter is death; the former is life.

Marianne must learn a painful truth. Willoughby is wrong for her, he is immoral, a bad boy. During the rising action, or complication, he seems the epitome of a romantic hero. During the falling action, or unravelling, the reader learns the truth. Not long before meeting Marianne, Willoughby seduced, impregnated, and abandoned Colonel Brandon's ward, Eliza Williams Jr, illegitimate daughter of the colonel's childhood love, Eliza Williams Sr.

This off-stage story is typical of how female vulnerability is exploited by male villainy. The elder Eliza was a wealthy orphan, under the guardianship of her uncle, the colonel's father. While she and the colonel were childhood sweethearts, his father coveted her fortune, because his estate was much encumbered. When Eliza Sr was seventeen, she was preparing to elope with the colonel, but her maid betrayed them, and she was forced to marry the colonel's brother against her will.

According to the colonel, Eliza Sr's husband treated her unkindly. He "had no regard for her; his pleasures were not what they ought to have been". She divorced him after two years, and allowed herself to be seduced by other men, and her allowance was never enough for her needs. Eventually, she was "worn down by acute suffering of every kind" and died from consumption. Her illegitimate daughter became Colonel Brandon's ward.

The colonel places Eliza Jr in a school until she turns fourteen. He then removes her to the care of a respectable woman in Dorsetshire. After two years, she travels to Bath, with a friend accompanying her father for his health. There she meets Willoughby, who impregnates her, and, according to the colonel, abandons her "in a situation of utmost distress, with no credible home, no help, no friends, ignorant of his address!"

Later, after the colonel challenges Willoughby to a duel, kept secret because no wounds were incurred, Willoughby attempts to justify himself, telling Elinor it was never his intention to fall in love with Marianne but did so despite himself. Her affection for him was insufficient to outweigh his dread of poverty, hence his marriage of convenience to Miss Grey. He denies abandoning Eliza Jr, does not recall having left her without his address, and is flippant: "common sense might have told her how to find it".

What would have happened had Eliza enough common sense to contact him? What kind of response, if any, would she have received? Willoughby appeals to common sense, as if an adolescent girl's lack of it excuses him from adult behaviour. The question here is: When does morality become a factor as biological imperatives are being acted out?

Leaving aside the oddness of Sedgwick's belief—a dogma of queer theory—that the love between Elinor and Marianne has a lesbian element, the reader following the plot closely should be able to consider whether Marianne was masturbating when Elinor entered the bedroom in London. This is the novel's climax. Marianne is having a nervous breakdown, finally realising that Willoughby is not her romantic hero, and she never had a promise of marriage from him.

Marianne's affinity with feeling (sensibility) made her wilful, led her to project a hedonistic passion onto Willoughby. She took a huge risk visiting Allenham alone with him, particularly without being engaged to him. Female virtue, a condition of social belonging, could be lost simply by being unchaperoned. In the period, seduction guaranteed immediate male control of female assets. Had she possessed an inheritance, could look forward to a fortune, the reader suspects he would have done to her what he did to Eliza Williams Jr.

Austen ensures all is resolved at the *denouement*, after Elinor and Edward are married, and Marianne and Brandon are married, once Marianne regulates her memories of Willoughby—holds them in check "by religion, by reason, by constant employment". If the logic of that is beyond Sedgwick's comprehension, it is because she lives in a world where female virtue no longer exists, sexual continence has become irrelevant, and sexual liberation is the only thing that matters.

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